

In The Flesh:

An Allegory for Harm Reduction and Stigmatization of Substance Abuse and Recovery,

With Zombies

Curry College

The show opens in a lock-down rehab center, a combination of a detox and a psych clinic. The main character, Kieren, is a patient, and days away from being released to go home with his family. His days are structured, consisting of one-on-one counseling, group sessions, and medication. Kieren is having vivid nightmares of things he'd done before entering treatment. He shares these nightmares with his psychologist, and inadvertently uses a slur to describe himself in the story. The psychologist immediately corrects him. Kieren has an illness, and the psychologist insists that Kieren is no longer the person who had committed the acts from his nightmares. He is in recovery, and after months in treatments, and medication to treat the symptoms of Kieren's illness, the psychologist pronounces Kieren ready to rejoin society.

Kieren, of course, is not being treated for addiction. He is being treated for Partially Deceased Syndrome, or in Kieren's own words, which the psychologist had declared to be a slur, for being a zombie. However, aside from the contacts he has to wear, and the skin-colored mousse he has to apply daily to look more human, there is very little in this show that focuses on the supernatural, rising-from-the-grave aspect of Kieren's story. Instead, every little detail, every interaction, communication, and reaction of the society focuses on the fact that Kieren is different.

Kieren's parents pick him up from the clinic, and it is immediately obvious that Kieren's sister Jem, the person he'd been looking forward to seeing, did not arrive with them. After a stilted conversation, where the parents seem surprised and pleased with how healthy Kieren looks, they inform him that Jem is still angry, but that she will "come

around.” On the long drive home, the parents don’t speak of the clinic, or Kieren’s medication. Instead, they attempt to keep the conversation light, catching Kieren up on recent happenings in the town and their closest neighbors. After the raw bleakness of the clinic, the scene in the car is uncomfortable and heavy. Their mood seems both tentative and hopeful, but there is a clear avoidance of all subjects relating to Kieren’s “zombie phase.” During this phase, Kieren had killed and eaten people in his town, but all this occurred during his “untreated state.” Despite not mentioning his treatment or medication, Kieren’s parents seem determined to act as if everything is normal.

Before his death, Kieren was clinically depressed. In addition, as a homosexual boy growing up in a small and prejudiced town, he faced a multitude of social difficulties. This included a short-lived secret relationship with Rick, whose father, upon finding out about the relationship, decided to send Rick into the army. After Rick was killed in Afghanistan, Kieren committed suicide. A short time later, the “Rising” occurred, and Kieren became a zombie along with many others. In many cases, the people who rose from their graves were killed in car accidents, died from illnesses like cancer and leukemia, or from old age. The show issues a sharp reminder that many times, the underlying cause of substance abuse and addiction has nothing to do with the substance, and everything to do with biological, psychological, and social difficulties that individuals are faced with in their everyday lives. Kieren’s depression resulted in his suicide, and the suicide resulted in his “zombie state,” or the addict state, where he mindlessly consumed other human beings in order to survive. When in the “zombie state,” he didn’t comprehend the damage he was doing, nor did he feel guilt over acts he

was committing. Now, in medication-assisted recovery, he struggles with memories of the damage he had done.

Kieren's sister refuses to speak to him, and she refers to him by "it" instead of "he." His parents are simultaneously afraid of him, and afraid of losing him again to his condition. In Kieren's community, there are those who consider themselves forward-thinking, and use the politically correct term for his condition. However, not many are ready to be vocal about it in the face of bigotry. There is also a great deal of bitterness in the same community over the damage Kieren, and those like him, had done during their "untreated state." Rick's father is one of the first to condemn Kieren's return to society. He is convinced that Kieren will inevitable return to his "untreated state," and that being perpetually medicated and in recovery, isn't a solution to Kieren's problem. Kieren will always be a zombie, or an addict, and no one can predict when he will return back to his "untreated state," or when he will relapse.

When Rick returns from Afghanistan, also a zombie, the metaphor becomes addiction caused by PTSD. While Kieren's parents spend a lot of time tiptoeing around Kieren's condition, they do help him administer the medication. They worry when he takes walks alone at night. They offer support, even when it's clear that it makes them uncomfortable. They awkwardly ask Kieren if he thinks it's a good idea to go outside without his mousse and contacts. They insist he sits with them at dinner table and share in family time, although he doesn't actually eat any more. They get some things right, and some things wrong. Communication is mostly uncomfortable, but it does occur, and although their efforts are clumsy, they are efforts nonetheless. Rick's father, on the other

hand, is in complete denial from the moment his son comes home. Although Rick is also a “zombie,” or an addict, Rick is ashamed, and determined to hide this thing that he considers to be a defect of character from everyone. The show subtly reminds us that we’ve grown be slightly more accepting of depression-caused addiction issues in ordinary people, versus the PTSD-caused addiction issues among the military personnel, who are still, especially in their own circles, expected to be “stronger” than everyone else. Rick applies mousse and contacts religiously, so his father has never seen him without them. He covers up his war-caused scars, including the one that killed him. He applies his own medication, an extremely difficult thing to do, as it involves a type of injector gun, similar to military vaccine jetgun, administered to the back of the neck. The conversations between Rick and his father are a cringeworthy parody of normalcy, and they are painful to watch. There is a scene where his father pressures Rick into drinking, although it is well known that any zombie who consumes human food becomes ill. Rick buckles under the pressure, then later vomits violently in the bathroom, but keeps the shower running, so his father wouldn’t hear. His father’s delusion is finally broken when Rick, tired of pretending, shows his father his true appearance. His father kills him, and leaves him on Kieren’s doorstep. It is implied that Rick’s father blames Kieren not only for his son’s homosexuality, but his zombie, or addict state as well.

The show goes on to draw many more parallels over two seasons. There is a nerve-wrecking portrayal of Kieren’s daily life, which features painful attempts at an impossible return to normality. The medication the “zombies” take is clearly a harm reduction method. They are still “zombies,” or addicts, who will always be addicts, and

there will always be that uncertainty when it comes to what may trigger them into a relapse. For “zombies” themselves, there is always a temptation to return to the “untreated state,” or to surrender to their addiction. Meanwhile, to many in the community, Kieren’s condition erases who he is as an individual. It is a clear commentary about how ill-equipped a society is to deal with any difference, especially one where the individual is seen as permanently different, even when in recovery. The show is an allegory of rejection and fear, and consequent discrimination towards all that is different and poorly understood.

However, Kieren’s story is one of self-acceptance, made possible by his experience. Despite all the issues that caused his suicide in the first place, and his follow-up destructive (zombie) phase, the show makes it clear that this was a necessary progression, and one that made his recovery possible.